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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
KATHLEEN BLISS

3rd October, 1945

DEAR MEMBER,

One of our members, who holds a leading position in British industry, has written us a long letter in which he urges with the utmost force that the atomic bomb ought to be put and kept in the forefront of all our thinking.

THE ATOMIC BOMB

"We are in mortal danger from many pressing problems, and it is by no means certain that civilization would survive the aftermath of the war, even if the atomic bomb had not made its appearance. The atomic bomb may not destroy us for a decade, but the control of it must be tackled without a moment's delay. If it is not done, it is not a matter of vast importance if Europe starves a few years before the final destruction. Christian News-Letter No. 241 is a terrific and true indictment. The outlook is appalling. This is the most tremendous material event in the history of mankind, and all the spiritual implications are equally tremendous. For once it seems that ethical principles and man's material interests are at one, and nothing more than ordinary common sense is needed to realize the danger. Whether it is possible to escape, and if so how, is a very different matter. The only immediate step I can think of is complete disclosure and full and free international inspection."

The alarming thing is the way in which public opinion seems to be reconciling itself to the idea that there will sooner or later be another war with the atomic bomb as the latest addition to its armoury. We find the Assistant Secretary of War in the United States urging America to become atom-bomb conscious and adopt an extensive and intensive programme of defence, and a distinguished British general blandly writing that "to every weapon an answer is sooner or later found, and so in time no doubt an answer to the atomic bomb will be found." It is clearly the duty of those responsible for national defence to take precautions against attack by this deadly weapon. But the issues at stake are not the concern of the military authorities alone, but of Governments and of every thinking individual. The only precaution that matters is that the enlightened public opinion of the world should insistently demand that there should be no more war and that the atomic bomb should be subject to rigorous international control.

Sir Stafford Cripps deserves the gratitude of everyone for his outspoken and rousing speech at Newcastle. This most urgent matter, he insisted, surpassed all others in importance. War had become certain national and international suicide. He did not believe that the peoples of the world had yet realized in any adequate degree what the atomic bomb means for the future of the world. The matter was one which must be taken up by everyone and not merely by a few over-worked statesmen. The driving power must come from the common men and women all over the world. Children must be brought up to understand that this is the great danger which has to be removed from the world.

Amongst the most arresting comments on the atomic bomb are the notes which appeared in the *New English Weekly* of August 30th. The writer suggests that if this is where science is going to lead us, there may be a revulsion of feeling against science in very wide circles. Mankind is not likely to submit quietly to having its life purposes thwarted, and once it awakens to the dangers it may swing to the opposite extreme of distrusting science, which it has hitherto regarded as the mainspring of progress.

The writer goes on to consider the more fundamental question whether, under the dominant influence of a false view of life, the activities of science are not being directed to mistaken ends in the sense that new discoveries are made in the wrong order. A disastrously one-sided concentration of energy in exploiting the material world for ill-conceived or unexamined human purposes throws the whole of human life out of balance. While to most commentators the problem is how the release of atomic energy may be turned to constructive instead of destructive purposes, in these notes the much more searching question is asked whether the enormous enhancement of mass production forces may not have grave dangers for the purposes of peace as well as for those of war. Access to an unlimited source of power for industry and locomotion may have caught us at a time when we do not know for what to use it. It may increase enormously man's expectations of material well-being whilst adding practically nothing to the real sources of his life and still further diminishing the desire to cultivate them.

The United Nations Organization, which is to hold its first meeting in December, will need the maximum of support in its efforts to avert the destruction of civilization by a war of atomic bombs. We shall give this matter continued attention in the Christian News-Letter.

It is essential at the same time to remember that the best efforts to overcome the danger by practical measures in the field of organization may be doomed to failure without a radical revolution in men's minds. We do not mean by this that everyone must be converted to Christianity before anything can be done. What is required is a hard perception of what man really is. Men need

to awaken to the fact that the attitude to life which is concerned primarily or exclusively with the exploitation of the material world to gratify the desire for increasing knowledge and power is a distortion of man's true nature from which fatal consequences are bound to follow. Here, indeed, is a chance for Christians. But the condition of our seizing it is that we should submit to the discipline of exposing our minds to what is implied in the new era ushered in by the release of atomic energy, so that we become increasingly capable of interpreting our faith in relation to the major problem which confronts mankind.

THE DEVOTIONAL LIFE IN THE MODERN WORLD

A letter from one of our readers raises a question which must be perplexing others. She is a young mother who had been used to devoting a considerable amount of time to fairly solid religious reading and to regular prayer and worship. She now finds that with little or no domestic help she has very little time for either and that her mind is too tired to grapple with heavy books. She asks what can be done to provide people in her position with religious reading and with a rule of life which can be carried out in the inescapable conditions imposed upon a busy mother. "If I were a Catholic," she says, "I might use the rosary. While I am thinking of prayers, the milk boils over."

The war, consuming our time with new duties and breaking up our regular habits of life, has made the discipline of private devotion exceedingly difficult, not for young mothers only, but for all. We are likely to continue in this condition of being tired and overpressed, and those who have not succumbed to neglect have perhaps devised for themselves new means of private prayer and worship, which others would be glad to share. If any of our readers can shed light on this subject from their own experience, we shall be glad to hear from them.

The plea for simpler books which can be read without hard intellectual discipline ought not to be confused with another plea which is far too often heard among Christian people for something religious which is comfortable, easy to read and reassuring. Scores of little books of piety, by encouraging escape from facing a world of tragic reality, bring religion into disrepute. The books of religion which are both simple and profound are the great works of the imagination. They do not appear as it were by chance, tossed off in any age or circumstance by some individual religious genius. Those who write them have their minds fed by a religious tradition; they are read, at least in the first instance, by those who share enough of the same experience to be able to understand it.

In his *English Social History*,[1] a book which brilliantly illuminates the religious scene in this country's past, Professor G. M. Trevelyan

[1] English Social History, Longmans, 21s.

attributes the success of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* to the fact that it described its readers to themselves and provided them with an answer to their own dilemma in terms which their imagination could compass. "That lonely figure on the first page of *Pilgrim's Progress*," says Professor Trevelyan, "with the Bible and the burden of sin, is not only John Bunyan himself. It is the representative Puritan of the English Puritan epoch . . . the poor man seeking salvation with tears, with no guide save the Bible in his hand." But, he adds, *Pilgrim's Progress* was written for people whose minds were chiefly nourished by the reading of the Bible. "If there had been newspapers, magazines and novels to compete with the Bible in manor-house, farm and cottage, there would have been no Puritan revolution—and John Bunyan would never have written *Pilgrim's Progress*."

One of the most serious problems in the intellectual and cultural life of our time is what has been described by a French writer as the breach in the continuity of consciousness between the present mood and the past. Younger writers and thinkers, whose minds have been shaped by catastrophic experiences cannot understand the thought of past generations. Not only have words changed their meaning; the experiences of men of the past are no longer shared. So long as the Bible is read, and there are people to whom its language is meaningful and compelling, and so long as the great Christian classics still speak to the Christian mind, Christians are preserving on the religious level a continuity of consciousness with the past. A great stream of religious wisdom, experience, truth and beauty is being kept open. This may ultimately be as important to the world as all the Church's conscious efforts to save it.

The Bible is sold in large numbers, and (judging by the memberships of various Bible reading associations) widely read, but how far does it still mould the thought of modern religious-minded people? If it does not, then we must discover what does. If the average young Christian is not Bible-minded, it is no use writing for him as though he were. So many questions are raised here, that we must and will return to them at a later date.

THE SUPPLEMENT

In the News-Letter No. 239, we discussed the relation between the Christian faith and the soil and raised some points about the direction in which the Council of the Church and the Countryside seemed to be moving. The Reverend David Peck discusses these points and expounds further some of the aims of the Council.

Yours sincerely,

Kathleen Bliss

THE CHURCH AND COUNTRYSIDE

By DAVID G. PECK

The C.N-L. for July 25th, 1945, gave some account of the Council for the Church and Countryside, which may have produced some misconceptions. This Supplement, written at the kind invitation of the editor, will endeavour to clear up these, and also to present the position taken up by the Council on certain theological and sociological questions of far-reaching importance.

We do not wish to elude—we rather invite—criticism that is germane and such as will promote further Christian thought and discussion on these topics. We admit, certainly, to welcoming the work of certain " ruralists " who have striven to elucidate those characteristics of a " natural order " needful for our times and to frame a critique of our social order from such a standpoint. Such pioneer and speculative thinking should not, however, be confused with our own official pronouncements.

THE NATURAL ORDER

Thus is raised the question of the " natural order " which is admittedly quite fundamental to our position. On this basis the alliances of which the Council consists were largely erected. I think we should all hold, with Dr. Gore, that " God and His ways are to be looked for in nature and anything fundamentally human." The complex and far-reaching conception of a " natural order " cannot be discussed at all fully here ; but it may be asserted that the Council has never identified the " natural order " with the disciplines of agriculture. There is some relation between them. But they are not identical. We should accept the limning by Dr. Demant (who is not a member of our Council) of the natural order as *transcendent* (of God, but distinct from Him) ; *noumenal* (its pattern never a phenomenon to be observed, but a truth to be apprehended by the mind of man) ; *eschatological* (not to be perfected until God's final perfecting of creation). We should be happy also to agree with Mr. MacKinnon's definitions at the Church Union Summer School of Sociology (the more so as Mr. MacKinnon has from time to time shown opposition to our school of thought) : that the " natural order " is a " pattern of stabilities in human life," a " structure of human existence which makes inexorable demands upon us." Whatever it is, " it exists as a norm and operative force in man as such " (Demant).

This conception is not, of course, a discovery of Christianity. It is not the gospel—but there are vital and necessary relations between them. The gospel is not the law : but there are similar relations there also. For the Christian the concept of a natural order must be an integral part of the doctrine of Creation which illuminates and reinforces it. Obviously if a " natural order " exists, a nature and structure of things, it profoundly affects man's relations to the physical world. Dr. Temple in his great C.N-L. Supplement for December, 1943, wrote that man's life " has been set in a natural order, which is God's creation.

A fundamental duty which man owes to God is reverence for the world as God has made it. Failure to understand and acknowledge this is a principal cause of the ineffectiveness of the Christian witness in relation to the temporal order . . . if we have dominion over it (the world of nature) that is as predominant partners, not as superior beings who are entitled merely to extract from it what gratifies our desires."

The creation, that is, is not of man *and* nature, but of man—*in*—nature. Whatever transcendent eternal end man may have, he must approach it within the finite and temporal terms of earthly existence. Otherwise there would seem to be no reason for the creation at all. And whatever may be involved for the creation in the doctrine of the Fall, it cannot be that it has become inherently evil—for this could mean that God is engaged in sustaining a contradiction of Himself.

Now, the idea that man belongs to another universe in respect of which he is not the crown of animal creation, but something *utterly different* would be inadmissible from our point of view. Admittedly man lives in a tension, between the natural and the supernatural, because man's task is to be nature's priest, to sublimate the natural to supernatural ends. But he cannot begin to do this if he has no " reverence for the world as God has made it," or if he denies his creaturehood. Admittedly to identify God and Nature is to destroy the tension. To declare nature and supernature to be utterly different would be to do so quite as thoroughly. There could be no relationship between things utterly different, no traffic as of Jacob's ladder, no exercising by man of his priesthood over nature, for he can never translate supernatural understanding into terms of earthly existence. There would thus be placed upon this spiritual-material creature, man, an intolerable psychological strain and frustration inherent in his very being and inescapable. There are some who maintain that the widespread frustration to-day is not unconnected with the sense of living in an unnatural order in which the organic relationship of nature and supernature is largely obscured. Man is not animal at some levels and spiritual at others : he is spirit through and through at every level, economic, political, sexual, called to give his spiritual perceptions material expression. At the same time, the material for this expression, the physical world, is not simply a lump of stuff for him to mould at will. It is itself a living thing, the creation of God, demanding in its handling the wisdom of a spiritual creature. The assumption that man has two natures utterly different involves a dichotomy of matter and spirit which has bedevilled modern liberalistic humanism and much post-Reformation Christian thought, both Catholic and Protestant. It is almost the charter of secularism.

A theology of the natural is an essential element in the Christian approach to the modern secular scene. Dr. Demant has remarked that " the conception of the natural law crops up as a kind of elemental necessity after periods of disuse or disbelief in it." Whether or no it has validity, its appearance is significant at this time as indicating a wide-spread sense of " unnaturalness," a desire to know " some permanent elements of human morphology." Not unexpectedly we find the emphasis in any such recrudescence of natural law thinking upon what is violated or neglected.

Hence the emphasis upon the life of the countryside. We are often reminded by our critics that the Church grew up in the cities of the Roman world, but that is not the whole story. The gospel, at any rate, was first preached principally in the countryside, and few indeed of the cities were much like London or the " conurbations " of modern England. Nor should we forget the work of the Christian orders in organizing and improving agriculture and rural life after the Roman system had so largely destroyed them. Moreover, " paganus " meant " unenlightened " in the Christian sense rather than " unbeliever " in our modern sense of believing in nothing. The pagan, as Mr. Chesterton remarked, was not a man with no God, but a man with far too many. If there are Christian intellectuals who despise primitive " natural religion," the Christian missionaries of pre-mediaeval Europe did not and Miss Underhill has reminded us that " the primitive, sensitive to the mysterious quality of life, worshipping by gift and gesture and devising ritual patterns whereby all the faculties of his nature and all the members of his group can be united in common action towards God, still remains a better model for human worship than the speculative philosopher or the solitary quietist, for he accepts his situation humbly instead of trying to retreat from it." And may it not be that the contributions of " paganism " to the Church were as much a part of the *preparatio evangelica* as the *logos* thought or the *pax Romana* ?

We do not think we have been subtly taken in the rear by biology : but we have perceived a great importance in the present movement away from the purely inorganic emphasis of modern science and we have not been influenced either by Neo-Calvinism, which denies the existence of a natural order and assumes human society to be irretrievably lost, or by that relativist Protestant liberalism which supposes that a social order historically produced is necessarily right and that the gospel must be fitted into it. Both influences are discernible in the opposition to the kind of social critique emerging from " natural law " thinking : but they are frequently muddled together in an illogical and confusing manner. The emphasis on the countryside is part of the emphasis upon what has been neglected. It is neither eccentric nor sentimental. It is concerned with those " permanent conditions upon which God allows us to live upon this planet," which as Mr. T. S. Eliot has reminded us, require to be faced if we who have believed in nothing " but the values arising in a mechanized, commercialized, urbanized way of life " would escape an otherwise inevitable doom. We are concerned, too, with the economic restoration of the countryside, for a reasonable and satisfactory social structure is imperilled by the upsetting of the " pattern of stabilities." We are concerned, further, with the rural community and are not uninterested in the supply of " amenities." The lack of these is serious enough, though they are often grossly exaggerated by people who conceive the rehabilitation of rural England too narrowly in terms of water pipes, the introduction of water-closets and cinemas. It will not come by importing the fashionable urban sensations or substitutes for true community. I will only come with the restoration of a true pattern of community.

There are too, we are convinced, certain religious virtues to be found in the life of the countryside. It is not the soil in which man has found a curse. (Indeed, man's conviction that work is a curse seems to have gained ground since the arrival of the machine age.) A curse descended upon the land as we lost all sense of an economy of need, all sense of men working for and with their own, all sense of other values of community and craft realizable in and through work, all sense of the organic relation between daily work and Eternal End. It fell when we subordinated all to the money-rule of the commercial-financial system. And this is borne out in the real and incontestable literature of the countryside, the voices of the dispossessed and pauperized and fragmented rural community of Stephen Duck and John Clare—of Jefferies, George Bourne and Alfred Williams.

We do not reject the machine. But we seek to provoke a discrimination in its use which shall replace the present dictation by a false economic. It is easy for those who use machine products to talk about the "comforts" it brings. It also creates its own drudgeries. It creates, too, its own peculiar romance, which is as romantic as anything which the alleged "romantics" have ever imagined.

This does not mean we are not well aware of the true interdependence, economic and cultural, of town and country (as our Aims and Principles 6. declares). A concern for the revival of rural England involves a concern for the true city.

NATURAL LAW AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

A final word. It is sometimes thought that a "natural law" is a mere substitute for the Christian religion and the theological virtues. But man's co-operation with natural law is voluntary—a matter for humility and grace. The natural order is the pre-condition of the Christian religion—which assumes it—yet the pre-condition is not and can never be ultimately satisfying to man. It is, however, with the natural that the supernatural is married. It can live with the unnatural. "The Gospel claims to give us abundance of life, but not without reconciling us to the norms of our creaturely existence." It could not do so for long if, for example, we destroyed the soil and were all starving to death. It would have great difficulty in doing so if the "unnaturalness" of life submerged in man his spiritual perceptions. The Gospel gives abundant life because it frees men from the false preoccupations of this world, because it gives that wisdom which is "the law of life" for our dealings with the physical order; not because it frees men from any concern with it, or from any responsibility to or dependence on it.

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